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By L. F. Palmer Jr.



America's forgotten astronaut

The negative attitudes many blacks have about America's successful moon landing indicate strong objections to this country's system of priorities.

But even more revealing is the depth of suspicion which persists in sectors of the black community about the death of the only black astronaut in a plane crash at Edwards Air Force Base in California in December, 1967.

This mistrust deepened in the minds of numerous blacks who have complained that most TV and press eulogies to astronauts killed in the space program omitted Maj. Robert H. Lawrence.

Many blacks believe with a passion that astronaut Lawrence, a brilliant scientist who overcame his Chicago ghetto environment, was deliberately killed to keep a black man from achieving the high honor of being one of the nation's first spacemen.

There are those who are convinced that the Central Intelligence Agency was responsible for Lawrence's death. Others insist that "they" did it, without explaining or really knowing who "they" are.

THESE BELIEFS speak worlds about the distrust many blacks have of our government. On the face, they seem preposterous.

Yet, doors have been left open for the kind of mistrust expressed by one black man who, on hearing of Lawrence's death, exclaimed: "They killed that Negro."

Press reports on the crash read: "The Air Force said the plane with the two pilots crashed on the runway during a proficiency training flight."

A careful examination of later reports reveals nothing to alter this version. The other pilot, Maj. Harvey J. Royer, was injured.

An Air Force spokesman, however, told this writer that the official Air Force probe shows that both pilots ejected before the crash and that Lawrence's parachute "did not open sufficiently."

The report blames Lawrence's death on "low ejection." The spokesman could find no information on the altitude at which the pilots ejected, despite the fact that one survived to tell what happened.

"THIS IS what makes me wonder . . . the fact that his parachute didn't open," Mrs. Ida Cress, the dead astronaut's mother-in-law, told me. Her daughter — Maj. Lawrence's widow Barbara — refuses to talk to newsmen.

"This is because of a combination of bitterness and the emotional stress of publicly reopening the fact of her husband's death," Mrs. Cress explained.

The astronaut's mother, Mrs. Gwendolyn Duncan, also declines to discuss the matter with reporters.

It is known, however, that Maj. Lawrence's family has been extremely unhappy about many facets of his death, including press reports indicating he was the pilot of the plane which crashed. He was not at the controls.

"THERE seemed to be an effort to make it appear that Bob was to blame," said Mrs. Cress, a Chicago Board of Education parent co-ordinator.

"And why have they tried to obscure his role in the space program? Black boys and girls need the kind of image that Bob represented."

Ishmael Flory, director of organization for the African-American Heritage Assn., is much more blunt:

"Certainly there is in the Afro-American community a suspicion that Maj. Lawrence might have died from foul play. And as long as the nation can talk about the space program and those who died for it, and ignore a black United States citizen like Lawrence, there will be further suspicion."

Flory says this oversight is another example of "racist sickness, though it may not be intentional." He demanded full disclosure of the circumstances behind the crash which killed the black astronaut.

IT IS, OF course, most unlikely that foul play will ever be admitted in the death of Maj. Lawrence, even if it were present. What is enormously significant is that there are black Americans so alienated from their government that they can harbor such ghastly thoughts.

To blacks, it is urgent that the contributions of men like Lawrence be given proper credit in the building of this country. It is upon such inspiration that black boys and girls can climb to their own potential.

In a eulogy to Maj. Lawrence at his funeral, the Rev. Ben Richardson said:

"He left us hope, a cause for optimism, a means by which men can inhabit the Earth joyously."

To snuff out this hope is to extinguish the American dream.



Maj. Robert H. Lawrence